Designing Early Television for the Ideal Home: The Roles of Industrial Designers and Exhibitions, 1930s -1950s

Deborah Chambers, Newcastle University

Journal of Popular Television, Volume 7 No. 2

Suggested citation
Chambers, D. (2019), 'Designing early television for the ideal home: The roles of industrial designers and exhibitions, 1930s–50s', *Journal of Popular Television,* 7:2, pp. 145–59, doi: 10.1386/jptv.7.2.145_1

Abstract
From the late 1930s, prominent architects and designers were enlisted in the design of early television receivers and their display at national exhibitions. This article examines the roles of art, industrial design and major exhibitions as cultural agents in popularising television as a national medium in Britain between the 1930s and 1950s. Bringing together debates about the cultural production of early television from media and cultural studies and design history, the article approaches industrial designers as cultural intermediaries who shaped cultural tastes and dispositions to popularise television. The Council of Industrial Design's philosophy and design strategies are assessed to explain the influence of British government policy on early television and model home interiors. The state and commercial promotion of television was framed by both *Modernist* ideas about 'good design' and *traditional* ideas about nation, gendered consumer values, family and home. The article argues that the government promotion of 'good taste' and 'good design' served as *moral* agents of post-war national improvement in forging a consumer-led public culture. Within these parameters, industrial designers performed the vital role of 'tastemakers' by bestowing status, legitimacy and value on television as a consumer technology and domestic medium designed for the ideal home and family.

Keywords: Early television, industrial design, Council of Industrial Design, national exhibitions, home, cultural intermediaries

Introduction

Television's entrance into the home from the late 1930s relied on public fantasies and media discourses about the technology. These discourses were articulated not only by manufacturers, the BBC and programming but also by designers, trade fairs, the Council of Industrial Design, and national exhibitions. Leading architects and designers styled and showcased television receivers at exhibitions such as the annual *Radiolympia and Ideal Home Exhibition*s and the *Festival of Britain (1951)*. They were involved not only in designing television for the home but also designing model homes for television. Notable British industrial designers included Wells Coates, Richard D. Russell, Eden Minns, and Robin Day. The combined efforts of these cultural agents transformed television from a machine into a *domestic* cultural artefact fit for an 'ideal home'. Whilst early television history encompasses studies of programming, audiences, and broadcasting institutions, the engagement of leading architects and designers in early television's domestic adoption is overlooked. This article offers an analysis of the major roles played by these cultural agents within a range of government and commercial strategies to popularise and domesticate early television.

The intersecting roles of designers, government policy, and national exhibitions in shaping and showcasing the television receiver for home consumption will be documented,

focusing on Britain. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural intermediaries is drawn on to explore the work of industrial designers within these historical developments. An interpretive approach is underpinned by biographical material and design histories including archival sources ranging from exhibition photographs, news reports and features about television sets in specialist and lifestyle magazines, government policy documents on design, manufacturers' newsletters, exhibition catalogues, and design history. I also engage with the innovative work of Helen Wheatley (2016, 2017) whose analysis of television's presence at the exhibition site uncovers its role in cultivating women audiences. By chronicling the aesthetic and material design, symbolism and public display of the television set between the 1930s and 1950s, the article's twin aims are: first, to identify the interconnecting influences of industrial design and national exhibitions in the history of television's material form; and second, to provide insights into the relations between industrial production, consumption and government policy – through the Council of Industrial Design – in shaping cultural tastes that underpinned the early television home.

Designers as cultural intermediaries

Designers worked at the embryonic stage of television technology, before its widespread adoption. Formerly referred to as 'industrial artists', industrial designers are mainly art school trained. From the 1930s, they performed as cultural intermediaries by conceiving the material shape of those media technologies with no prior form: radios, gramophones and television receivers. This stage entails public contestations about the technology's potential: how it should look, be used, by whom and where. In this article, I use Bourdieu's (1984) formulation of 'cultural field' as a conceptual framework to address design as a network of sites, texts, producers and consumers (Zukin and Smith Maguire 2004: 173) by focusing on both producers (designers) and discourses (design ideology and exhibitions) involved in early television as a cultural form. This approach facilitates a study of the cultural economy of television receiver technology (see Smith Maguire 2015). Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'cultural intermediary' is employed to understand how industrial designers mediate between production and consumption as producers of symbolic goods and services in the (re)production of consumer economies.

As Bourdieu emphasises, 'taste' is a contested arena in which struggles over legitimacy and distinction occur not only for particular cultural goods, but also particular ways of life. Cultural intermediaries exploit the media to achieve their pedagogical work of influencing consumer tastes as strategies for disseminating their cultural wares and middle-brow culture Maguire and Matthews (2010:407) 407; Bourdieu 1984). Legitimate cultures do not require cultural intermediary support since their cultural value is already protected through established authorities. In the case of industrial designers, occupational members work within cultural production as *tastemakers* to canonize the 'not-yet-legitimate' (1984: 326). The not-yet-legitimate features of television were two-fold. First, television emerged as an alien technology yet was intended for the domestic space of the 'parlour'. Second, as a consumer product it involved factory-made, standardised production techniques. Within these parameters, designers aimed to shape tastes and dispositions to popularise television technology as a *cultural* form in the fields of production and consumption.

Pre-war television designers and exhibitions

Lynn Spigel (1992, 2001) explains the role of mid-century discourses about television in relation to public and private space. Correspondingly, David Morley (1992) emphasises the power of television programmes to draw public life into domestic cultures and evoke 'home' as *national* culture. The experience of early television within a 'public' realm was also fostered in the context of public exhibitions. For example, by 1930 Baird Television's early

models were displayed at *Radiolympia* and the *Ideal Home Exhibition* where visitors themselves could be 'televised' as part of the new televisual spectacle (Wheatley 2016: 37). The *Ideal Home Exhibition* played a significant role in promoting television to consumers as a desirable medium and commodity, with six manufacturers exhibiting and demonstrating sets in 1938. Sponsored by the *Daily Mail* and founded in 1908 as its publicity tool to increase advertising revenue, the exhibition showcased the latest housing, interior designs and consumer durables. This spectacular event was patronised by visiting royalty and celebrities. Home interiors were presented as stages to attract the gaze of the middle-class 'housewife'. On this stage, home-based entertainments such as radio and television were portrayed as quintessentially nuclear family activities (Chapman 1999). BBC television programmes of the Exhibition were broadcast direct from the Olympia site's between 14 and 20 April 1938 (*Radio Times* 1938). These exhibition displays of television addressed women as the main proponents of a public spectacle of 'domestic modernity' (Wheatley 2017: 206–7).

A landmark event for showcasing the innovative technology of television was also London's *Radiolympia* show. These annual wireless industry trade fairs were large, stage-set events, appropriate for launching television (Briggs 1965: 552). By 1936, nine major radio manufacturers were displaying television receivers at *Radiolympia* including receivers of the ultimately adopted Marconi-EMI electronic system. With small screens housed in bulky wood veneered cabinets, these initial consoles typically characterised nine-inch monochrome cathode-ray tubes with a deflection angle of 60 degrees. Some sets housed projection receivers projecting a large picture up to twenty inches onto a concave mirror (Bussey 1980).

In 1936, the world's first regular public television service transmitted in London from Alexandra Palace used the 405-line television transmissions, covering a radius of only 30 miles. Received by about 400 people, television remained a technical enigma to most of the British population. The Television Advisory Committee of 1938 concluded that the slow take-up of television was exacerbated by high priced receivers. They advised lowering prices to broaden appeal (Burns 1997). In response, the 1938 *Radiolympia* show also displayed table-top models with small 5 and 6-inch screens, such as Murphy's A56V for 30 guineas, almost 10 guineas less than its nearest competitor. Nineteen manufacturers exhibited 60 different receivers or combined radio-TV sets from British radio manufacturers alongside those from Italy, Germany and France. With 23,000 sets in use, this was significantly higher than in other countries (Briggs 1965). By now, the BBC had built a special TV studio at *Radiolympia* (Traub 1938).

While 1930s industrial design involved anonymous draughtsmen, engineers and furniture cabinet makers, radio companies called upon leading architects, artists and designers to style the cabinets for this new television technology. Collaboration between industrial designers and radio manufacturers had already generated several famous modern radio designs. Manufacturers realised that television's outer casing would be a major selling point when it was discovered that 80 per cent of radio set purchases were based on appearance alone (Farr 1955: 72). During this period, the European Modernist style was influencing British architecture, interior design and furniture. Founded in 1919 in Germany at the Bauhaus by Walter Gropius, the movement aimed to reunite creativity and manufacturing by fusing fine and applied art principles. The Modernist dictum, 'form follows function' generated geometric styles to counter 'excessive' ornamentation of earlier Victorian machine-made products (Chambers 2011).

In 1932, a Board of Trade Committee report on Art and Education emphasized the need to display the best examples of the new industrial art to raise national design standards and promote design consciousness among the public (Board of Trade 1932). At its request, a series of national Modernist exhibitions were mounted. For example, in 1935, the Royal

Society of Arts launched the exhibition 'British Art in Industry' to boost export trade and educate British and overseas publics on the importance of 'good design' in British manufacturing goods. The BBC, now taking an interest in the British Modern Movement and the new breed of industrial designers, launched several radio programmes in 1933 on the subject of design including *Design in Modern Life*; Gordon Russell on *The Living room and Furniture*; Wells Coates on *Dwellings*; Elisabeth Tenby on *The Kitchen* (McCarthy 1979). Through these public mediums of exhibitions, programming, and Modern Movement principles, designers worked as cultural agents to connect *domestic* 'taste' with 'modernity' as a forward-looking aesthetic and manufacturing/trade movement suited to domestic interiors. The BBC also endorsed the Modernist style by commissioning well-known designers, Wells Coates and Serge Chermayeff, to design interior fittings for Broadcasting House, opened in 1933.

Lending cachet to the emerging technology of television

From 1930, leading television manufacturers such as Murphy Radio, EKCO and Pye responded to this government call for 'good design' by employing top designers. By 1939, an average-sized manufacturer was producing annually 'about five new table radios, three television sets, two radiograms and two portables' (Farr 1955: 72). Although roughly 25 per cent had plastic cabinets, the rest were made entirely of wood. Some sets boasted closing doors to conceal the black screen when switched off. Few factories had cabinet-making workshops, so the work was regularly sent out to a furniture firm. With the radio industry relying on plastic as well as wood, the process of moulding was expensive. Employing consultant designers ensured quality since speculating with impulsive designs involved costly mistakes (Mackenzie 1937; Elgohary 1966: 190). Murphy Radio exemplifies those companies that paid famous furniture designers to style radio and television consoles. Gordon Russell, his brother Richard D. Russell, and Eden Minns were architect-trained designers who integrated high quality furniture design and craft techniques for near-as-possible mass production for Murphy. As cultural intermediaries, they played leading roles in key points of cultural change in Britain. From the Arts and Crafts Movement to the rise of mass production of factory production, they embraced the Modern Movement through the design and display of their wares at national exhibitions. Gordon Russell, a key figure in British design, became Director of the Council of Industrial Design in 1947 Within this cultural field, these tastemakers performed a vital pedagogical task of shaping consumer aspirations and promoting television as a *legitimate* cultural artefact for the home.

The first Murphy projection television receiver, model A42V AC, designed in 1937 by Eden Minns, Head of Cabinet Design Department, boasted a reversed screen image viewed via a mirror in the lid, with a picture of 9 x 7 inches. Labelled a 'luxury product' costing £65, the cabinet of Bombay rosewood was impregnated with black pearwood (Reeves 2007: 27). Richard D. Russell, who began designing cabinets in 1931 at his brothers' furniture firm, became Murphy Radio's leading designer of radio and TV cabinets. In 1939, he designed the A56V: a TV in an enormous wooden box with a tiny screen and picture sized 7½ x 6 inches, allowing a reasonable price: £30. He also designed table-top versions to lower costs and show the versatility of the receiver for living room positioning. By 1951, Russell was Professor at the Royal College of Art (Russell 1968).

In the production of radio casings and television consoles, the British electronics company, E. K. Cole (aka EKCO) were also known for working with famous designers such as Wells Coates, Serge Chermayeff, and Misha Black. Coates worked with EKCO from 1934 to 1937, having established his links with broadcasting by designing studios for the BBC in London and Newcastle. He also designed the iconic round Bakelite cabinets used

by EKCO for its 1930s radios. His award-winning Model EKCO AD-65 (1932), styled with brown plastic to simulate burr-walnut, is now featured in the V&A permanent collection (V&A Archives). Through plastic moulding, Coates' design of televisions combined the Modernist style of functionalism with prevailing tastes in interior décor that demanded ornamental craft styles in furniture.

A pioneer of Modernism in 1930s' British architecture and design, Coates launched his own design firm in 1928. Trained in engineering, he was a co-founder of the think tank Modern Architectural Research Group in 1933 and acquainted with leading practitioners of modern architecture (Cohen 1999). It was through these networks that Coates explored the common ground between architecture, fine art and engineering. He was appointed Master of the Faculty of Royal Designers for Industry, Royal Society of Arts, London in 1951 (Elgohary 1966). Between 1955 and 1956, Coates taught at Harvard's Graduate School of Design with Walter Gropius. As a cultural mediator, his status within the elite, legitimate sphere of 'high culture' was co-opted for the world of mass production to lend cachet, authenticity and value to the emerging technology of television (see Bourdieu 1984, 1996).

Robin Day designed televisions and radios through a partnership with the electronics company Pye Ltd from 1949, having trained at the Royal College of Art. His television design work reflected his work for the furniture company Hille, where he combined geometric lines with functionality in simple Modernist styles. As designers, branders and marketers of early TV, these cultural agents became household names through magazine and radio features. Day wrote for *Vogue* and *House & Garden* with an April 1949 piece for the latter titled 'Make Room for Television' offering advice on how these electronic devices could be incorporated into modern homes. He suggested they could be built into cupboards, bookshelves or disused fireplaces. Consolidating his status as an 'expert' on aesthetics and good taste, he reminded readers that the 'look' of the object was paramount, since the set would be switched off most of the day (Jackson 2001: 74).

Industrial designers emerged, then, from the 1930s as cultural intermediaries. Through attention to design, aesthetics and consumer discernment, these 'needs merchants' intervened between production and consumption to become the vanguards of taste. Forming a cultured elite whose work intersected art/style/architecture by offering themselves as 'role models and guarantors' (Bourdieu 1984: 365), all the above-named designers went on to design consoles, model rooms, stands or buildings for the *Festival of Britain*. They predicted and shaped consumer demand by designing and showcasing standardised television technology for the 'media age'.

Postwar design ideology: designers as moral agents

Despite competition in television technology and the manufacture of receivers from America and Germany, around 23,000 sets were in use by 1939 in Britain – considerably more than its rivals. However, the British government halted the manufacture of television sets for the duration of the war to concentrate communication technology production on military objectives. After a five-year interruption, a British service resumed in 1946. But new TV sets were scarce: less than two-thirds of the British adult population had ever seen a working set (Hopkins 1961). In a climate of post-war austerity, British television design was hampered by severe materials shortages. American television product development now posed serious competition for UK industry. In 1944, the wartime Board of Trade launched the COID to 'promote better standards of design in British industry […] to mount design exhibitions and to educate consumers about the social, aesthetic and economic benefits of design in everyday life' (Woodham 2004: 463). Promoting 'good design' and 'economic efficiency' as intersecting principles, the COID associated 'good design' with 'good living' and model homes (Woodham 1997).

The remarkable idealism of this 'good design' movement was endorsed not only by the Arts Council of Great Britain but also the post-war BBC (Tracey 1998). From 1946, the BBC established an alliance with the COID to promote government design policy via programming. Within a growing commodity culture, television broadcasting and 'good design' became moral agents of national improvement. This alliance was consistent with the BBC's Reithian values of using television, like radio, as a vehicle of national improvement. These national civic organizations supported a series of morale-boosting exhibitions to establish a public culture that would simultaneously enlighten, entertain and kick-start the economy. Thus, designers' cultural intermediary role entailed a fundamental moral dimension. Within this cultural field, they became what Bourdieu calls the 'transmission belt' for the moral re-equipping of the post-war economy by leading a noble ethos of 'good taste' and 'good living' (Bourdieu 1984; Smith Maguire and Matthews 2010). Assuring a need for both their own expertise and product, designers mediated between the state, commercial enterprise and homes.

Television console design became a focus of COID publications, framed by design policy. To root out 'bad design' via a survey of design in British industry, Michael Farr concluded that television receiver design by engineering draughtsmen 'is imitative, mediocre, and subject to all manner of fashionable crazes. Furthermore […] the television sets produced by these firms are timid in design, self-effacing and characterless' (1955: 76). Berating manufacturers who styled TV cabinets as furniture, he quoted extracts from promotional leaflets at Radiolympia in 1949: 'A combined television and powerful all-wave radio receiver in figured walnut, and a really fine piece of furniture'; 'A floor model television receiver, the lower part forming as useful bookcase […] provides an attractive piece of furniture' (quoted in Farr 1955: 77).

Exasperated, Farr wondered 'what then, is a "piece of furniture?"'. He proclaimed that manufacturers such as Murphy upheld exacting standards because they employed consultant designers (1955: 77). Farr praised a 1930s television designed by Wells Coates for *Radiolympia* described in EKCO's promotional pamphlet: 'The cabinet, in its graceful, elegant simplicity, is worthy of its place among the finest furniture *for itself alone* […]' (Farr 1955: 77, emphasis added). Coates was commended for approaching the problem not just as furniture but as 'a piece of modern machinery' (Farr 1955: 72). Promoting 'clean', minimalist and machinelike forms was not a gender neutral decorative style (Sparke 1995). In her account of mid-century American designer George Nelson's Storagewall, designed to manage domestic 'clutter', Spigel argues that (male) modernists associated Victorian decor with untidiness, 'disorder' and feminine tastes while associating modernist design with masculine efficiency and rational order (Spigel 2012).

Within this cultural economy of television receiver technology, industrial designers were thrust to the forefront of the British government's attempts to introduce regimes of 'good taste' in the home and boost the United Kingdom's economic performance. However, the application of COID doctrine was hampered by manufacturer indifference and hostility towards government intervention. Exhibitions and prizes for good design were therefore planned as the best strategies for persuading manufacturers that 'good design means good business'. It was in this political climate that national exhibitions such as *Britain Can Make It* (1946) and the *Festival of Britain* were conceived to embody the social idealism expressed by the COID (Woodham 1997). The major post-war exhibition *Britain Can Make It* held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1946 was an early attempt by post-war design experts to fulfil COID philosophy by popularizing design to mould public taste. The exhibition aimed to stage a prestige advertisement before the world for British industry, industrial design and standards

of display (1946). Although deemed a success by the design establishment, attracting almost a million and a half visitors, the event was lacklustre. Marred by severe post-war materials shortages, most exhibits were either publicly unavailable prototypes or for export only to help repay Britain's war debt (Woodham 2004). The press nicknamed the event 'Britain Can't Have It'. An archived photo of the Radio and Television Section reveals table-top TVs displayed in predictable rows on individually spot-lit shelves (Britain Can Make It Exhibition 1946). A Murphy television projection receiver with legs designed by Eden Minns – a pale wooden cabinet with doors – remained a prototype (see Minns 1946).

The 1948 *Radiolympia* trade fair was cancelled to ensure manufacturers concentrated on designing exports. But other consumer exhibitions that year included the Ideal Home Exhibition, showcasing standard 9- and 10-inch screen TV models. These post-war consumer fairs also staged demonstrations of the technology, elevating television as a public spectacle (Wheatley 2017). Pye even demonstrated a colour TV system at the exhibition (Howes 2002–15). A striking attraction at the 1949 *Radiolympia* show, after a year's suspension, was the HMV demonstration of a television in a car (Evans 2005–06). This stunt confirmed the lengths manufacturers would go to portray receivers as mobile objects that could escape the home (see Spigel 1992). And this was before the public had fully grasped the idea of television as a *domestic* device.

Television's presence in 1950s model living rooms

Ideal Home Exhibition

By 1950, the *Ideal Home Exhibition* was displaying television consoles in model furnished rooms (Ryan 1997). Yet many still believed that, like cinema, TV must be viewed in a darkened room. An 'educational' approach enlightened visitors of the technology's appearance, feel, and viewing position in the home. However, Britain continued facing severe consumer product shortages. This 'ideal' home, with its futurist technologies, remained a dream. Notwithstanding this disjunction between ideal and reality, one living room interior was COID designed with a freestanding wooden TV console. Yet tucked in the corner of the dining end of an open plan dining/living room, it suggested designers were unsure how to present the technology (Design Council Archive: DCA2337).

By now, these bulky sets looked incongruous next to popular, new spindly1950s furniture. Designers responded by producing table-top sets with removable spindly legs. Creating a seating problem in the parlour, the question was whether to arrange the chairs around the fireplace or 'electric eye'. One attempt to address the problem at the 1951 *Ideal Home Exhibition* was a prototype 'fireplace' TV set described as a 'thoroughly modern fireplace, with a single electric fire above which is a built-in television set' (Ryan 1997: 96). The Art Deco styling formed the screen's circular frame, with a tiny electric fire positioned below the screen. Publicised in news and features, post-war *Ideal Home Exhibitions'* domestic interiors became key platforms for promoting consumer culture. By linking concepts of 'ideal' and 'home', these events formed an imaginative space through which the tensions between tradition and modernity, art and technology, nostalgia and modernity were played out (Curtis 1998). Presentations of television in this setting highlighted the fascination associated with this 1950s 'ideal home'.

At earlier trade fairs, the television set was marketed to men within established masculine discourses of objective technical rationality. It was approached as a technology for 'gadget fiends' keen on radios and cars (Hilton 2003: 202). However, the philosophy of the *Ideal Home Exhibition* underscored a series of post-war initiatives through which *women* were targeted as new consumer citizens, via design idealism. Whilst men were addressed as

rational purchasers of goods, women were addressed as 'good housewives' located in the domestic arena. Women were expected to be concerned with upholding the family's status through material possessions within the post-war rebuilding of family life. As Wheatley states, 'television was at the centre of this narrative of consumer aspiration and affordable luxury at the *Ideal Home Exhibition*' (2016: 46). Exhibitions served as a vital medium through which women could negotiate and identify with the dramatic changes associated with the post-war modernisation of the domestic sphere.

The Festival of Britain

The 1951 *Festival of Britain* was intended as a 'tonic to the nation', following wartime austerity. Conveying design as an agent for *moral guidance*, the Festival aimed to promote the best in art, design and industry by showcasing advanced consumer goods, gadgets and household appliances. To avoid criticisms of previous government exhibitions, visitors could order any items displayed. As Wheatley confirms, television figured as a spectacle of modernity at the Festival. Advertisements for television ensured 'television's placement at the centre of the *Festival of Britain*'s dual aims to celebrate the scientific and cultural achievements of Britain' (Wheatley 2016: 28). More than twenty leading designers and progressive young architects created 'the autobiography of a nation' through a series of themed pavilions including a Television Pavilion designed by Wells Coates, known for his television consoles. The pavilion's themes formed a story that mapped Britain's past achievements, showing how the nation arrived at today's cutting-edge design and technology. Coates also designed the adjacent purpose-built film theatre on the South Bank, called the 'Telekinema'. This unique 400-seat cinema was designed for a large-screen television as well as three-dimensional sound and stereoscopic films. It formed a highly popular Festival attraction, with over 400,000 visitors. In *Spectacular Television* (2016), Wheatley provides a comprehensive account of both the Telekinema and Television Pavilion. The Television Pavilion building 'offered a visual representation of the technology of television as spectacular in and of itself' (2016: 30).

With receivers displayed in model living rooms in the Homes and Gardens Pavilion as well as the Television Pavilion, this Festival was the first occasion at which many had seen working television sets. Model domestic interiors formed a major theme by promoting an aspirational home-centred lifestyle for which television sets were designed: comfortable, consumer-oriented, leisure-centred, and increasingly privatized. 'Family' and 'home' were key metaphors for the nation at the Festival, conveying a powerful sense of national consensus to circumvent social tensions and inequalities (Atkinson 2012). As Wheatley explains, 'television was thus positioned at the exhibition to connect the public and private sphere, and as a simultaneously contemporary and futuristic technology' (2017: 210). Although exhibits invoked *future* imaginings of home, they were framed by *past* domestic traditions (Langhamer 2004). Galvanised by concerns about declining birth rates and the need to build families, the government positioned women within the home as 'housewives', as markers of traditional family values yet framed within the 'clean' aesthetics of Modernism. Paradoxically, women often faced *more* confinement in this new TV home since, as Spigel indicates in her study of post-war American domestic ideals, the medium was a substitute for public participation (Spigel 1992, 2001).

Figure 1: Murphy television set designed by Eden Minns (Minns 1951).

Model rooms formed the main avenue through which family-centred home life was conveyed at the Festival. The COID directed the themes for the Homes and Gardens section by managing room content and assigning leading architect/designers to showcase 'good' design. Seven parlour rooms were designed as part of the Homes and Gardens by Eden Minns and wife Bianca Minns. One parlour contained a Murphy television set designed by Eden Minns (Design Council Archive: DCA0136). But after the Festival started, these initial Minns-designed rooms were rejected as elitist by COID and exhibition organisers because they were furnished with items beyond the reach of the public. Countering COID propaganda, the model parlours were replaced by five redressed rooms. New design teams were appointed to style 'living rooms' for more informal home entertainment (Atkinson 2012: 169).

Significantly, 1951 was a transitional period when the 'parlour' was replaced in many standard homes by a flexible, open-plan living room to provide a sense of space (Madigan and Munro 1999: 63). This re-evaluation, fostered by Modernist design, coincided with television's instatement in the home. The accent was not only on the television's appearance but also on the positioning of the set in this communal room, with family arranged around it. Television viewing was now conveyed as a resolutely collective, sociable and modern family medium (Chambers 2016).

The five replacement parlours at the Festival reflected the Festival organisers' concern to ensure exhibits were accessible to visitors as mass-produced items. They were

delineated along class lines with one luxuriously styled, two for ‘lower-class occupants’ and two for middle-class occupants.

Figure 2: Robin Day’s design for an open-plan living room for the Homes and Garden Pavilion with a Murphy table-top TV (Day 1950).

These refurbished rooms were more informal, deviating from earlier ideas of the formal parlour by emphasising comfort and leisure with pianos, gramophones, TV sets and ‘hobby corners’. By now, settees were designed for TV viewing. Robin Day designed an open-plan living room for the Homes and Garden Pavilion with a Murphy table-top TV placed on a shelf suspended from the wall with ‘*sectional settee for television viewing*’ facing the set (Figure 2; Day 1950, emphasis added). Emphasizing the rise of the ‘media home’, furniture was now arranged centrally around the TV (Jackson 2001: 40–43). By the 1960s, a shift ‘from Victorian sentiment to rational modernism fostered the popularity of the Storagewall concept of concealing equipment and reconfiguring the social life of the home with portable TVs slotted among other items into wall-shelving’ (Spigel 2012: 571).

These 1950s model living rooms presented ideal versions of domestic life, showing consumers how the ideal, modern home should look. Designed mainly for nuclear families, exhibited interiors were framed within discourses of consumer aspiration to express class distinctions of taste and cultural value through modern goods. The model home was signified as a retreat from public view ‘and a place for the exercise of private dreams and fantasies’, yet at the same time, the space was exposed to public scrutiny (Chapman and Hockey 1999:

10). Here, ‘good design’ was conceived as both a moral and patriotic endeavour by associating good design with good families and as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984).

Conclusion

This case study of early TV confirms that leading industrial designers performed the role of cultural intermediaries to facilitate the aesthetic signification of television as a media technology destined for the home. It indicates that the television receiver was the site of a cultural struggle involving the politics of ‘good taste’ in British design. Industrial designers performed a pedagogic function, shaping the views and dispositions of consumers to generate aspirations for television as a desirable domestic artefact. By exploiting aesthetics as a moral force *and* market device, the nascent industrial design profession underpinned the promotion of a consumer-led public culture and the birth of the modern media home. Designers were significant market actors in the cultural economy of goods, co-opted as legitimate artists not just by manufacturers but also the COID in the quest for consumer markets. As promoters of ‘good design’, they lent status, legitimacy, and value to the new technology of television.

This study also explains how national exhibitions formed a strategic dimension of British *public culture* by promoting television in the context of ‘good design’. Government-led design initiatives marked the beginning of representations of an ideal television home via exhibitions of televisions embedded in model rooms through themes of ‘family’, ‘home’ and ‘nation’. The COID, industrial designers and exhibitions mobilised distinctive versions of the model nuclear family, model living room and model ‘television home’ as symbols of national pride. Designers intervened as tastemakers between production and consumption, television set and exhibition room design by shaping consumer tastes and promoting Modernist-designed homes as virtuous and noble.

Through design, popular discourses of tradition and modernity were (re)-configured to sustain both traditional class and gender roles within an ideology of consumer-led, pleasurable ‘homemaking’. Together with exhibition history, television’s design history underscores the government, manufacturing and aesthetic mission of promoting TV as a ubiquitous, ordinary object yet also a ‘device of modernity’: an aspirational, spectacular, futuristic and *gendered* technology. Women were addressed by designers and exhibitions as consumer citizens to promote this new lifestyle framed by consumer and family values. By the end of the 1950s when television as a medium became established, national exhibitions were overtaken by TV programmes as a platform for promoting ‘good design’, to attract and ‘educate’ consumer citizens in ‘good taste’.

Acknowledgements

The images are included here with thanks to the Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives.

References

Anon. (1938), ‘Television: 8th to 20th April’, Radio Times, January/December, pp. 16–21, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/RT-TV-1938.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Atkinson, H. (2012), *The Festival of Britain: A Land and Its People*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Board of Trade (1932), *Report of the Committee appointed by the Board of Trade under the chairmanship of Lord Gorell on the production and exhibition of articles of good design and everyday use*, HMSO, London.

Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press.

Briggs, A. (1965), *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom – The Golden Age of Wireless*, vol. 2, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Britain Can Make It, *Exhibition Catalogue* (1946), Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Britain Can Make It Exhibition (1946), The Radio and Television Section, Id Number Current Repository: DCA1064, Council of Industrial Design, Brighton: Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives, http://www.vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=81161&sos=1. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Burns, R.W. (1997), *Television: An International History of the Formative Years*, London: Institution of Engineering and Technology.

Bussey, G. (ed.) (1980), 'Vintage television receivers', *The Great Optical Illusion*, London: Science Museum (A Philips Industries publication in Conjunction with Thorn Consumer).

Chambers, D. (2011), 'The material form of the television set', *Media History*, 17: 4, pp. 359–75.

—— (2016), *Changing Media, Homes and Households*, London: Routledge.

Chapman, T. and Hockey, J. (1999), 'The Ideal Home as imagined and lived' in T. Chapman and J. Hockey (eds), *Ideal Homes? Social change and Domestic Life*, London: Routledge, pp. 1– 14.

Chapman, T. (1999), 'Stage sets for ideal lives: images of home in contemporary show homes', in T. Chapman and J. Hockey (eds), *Ideal Homes? Social change and Domestic Life*, London: Routledge, pp. 44–58.

Council of Industrial Design, (1950), Id Number Current Repository: DCA2337, Ideal Home Exhibition, Brighton: Design Council, Design Archives, University of Brighton Design Archives, http://www.vads.ac.uk/ large.php?uid=79941&sos=1. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Curtis, B. (1998), 'Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition: The Ideal Home: through the 20th century', *Journal of Design History*, 11: 3, pp. 266–8.

Day, R. (1950), Id Number Current Repository: DCA0147, Brighton: Design Council Archive, University of Brighton Design Archives, http://www.vads. ac.uk/large.php?uid=82052&sos=5. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Elgohary, F. H. (1966), *Wells Coates and his position n the beginning of the Modern movement in England*, PhD, University College London.

Evans, J, (2005–6), *The Valve Page*, Evans, http://www.thevalvepage.com/ tvyears/1949/tvy1949text.htm. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Farr, M. (1955), *Design in British Industry: a mid-century survey*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hilton, M. (2003), *Consumerism in twentieth-century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hopkins, H. (1961), The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties, London: Secker and Warburg.

Howes, R. (2002–15), 'The virtual museum of the Official Pye Telecom historic collection', Pye History Trust, http://www.pyetelecomhistory.org. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Jackson, L. (2001), *Robin & Lucienne Day: Pioneers of Contemporary Design*, Mitchell Beazley, London.

Langhamer, C. (2005), 'The meanings of home in postwar Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40: 2; pp. 341–62.

Law, M.J. (2018) *1938: Modern Britain: Social Change and Visions of the Future*, London: Bloomsbury page 153.

Mackenzie, M. (1937), 'EKCO' *Art and Industry*, December 1937, pp. 217–28.

Madigan, R. and Munro, M. (1999), "'The more we are together": domestic space, gender and privacy' in T. Chapman and J. Hockey (eds), *Ideal Homes? Social change and Domestic Life*, London: Routledge, pp. 61–72.

Maguire, J. and Matthews, J. (2014) 'Introduction' in Maguire, J. and Matthews, J. (eds) *The Cultural Studies Reader*, London: Sage.

McCarthy, F. (1979), *A History of British design 1830-1970*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Morley, D. (1992), *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge.

On the Air, the online radio and televion history centre available at http://www.vintageradio.co.uk/htm/tvhistory.htm

Reeves, J. (2007), 'Murphy News, February 1948', in *The Best of Murphy Cabinet Design 1930 to 1950, electronic catalogue*, http://www.murphy-radio.co.uk/diagrams/Murphy_Radio_Russell&Minns_1930-1950.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Ryan, D. (1997), *The Ideal Home Exhibition Through the Twentieth Century*, London: Hazar publishing.

Smith Maguire, J. and Matthews, J. (2010), 'Cultural Intermediaries and the Media', *Sociology Compass*, 4: 7, pp. 405–16.

Smith Maguire, J. (2015), 'Authenticity is the new luxury? Market myths and the reproduction of consumer culture', *American Sociological Conference*, Chicago, 22–25 August, https://lra.le.ac.uk/bitstream/2381/32908/2/authenticity%20is%20the%20new%20luxury%20%28Smith%20Maguire%20LRA%29.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Sparke, P. (1995), *As Long as It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, London: Pandora.

Spigel, L. (1992), *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

____ (2001), *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media in Postwar Suburbs*, Durham: Duke UP.

—— (2012), ‘Object lessons for the media home: From storagewall to invisible design’, Public Culture, 24:3, pp. 535–57.

Tracey, M. (1998), *The Decline and Fall of Public Service Broadcasting*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wheatley, H. (2016), ‘Television in the Ideal Home’, in R. Moseley, H. Wheatley and H. Wood, *Television for Women*, London: Routledge, pp. 205–22.

____ (2017), *Spectacular Television: Exploring Televisual Pleasures*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Woodham, J. (1997), ‘*Britain Can Make It* and the history of design’, in P. J. Maguire and J. Woodham (eds), *Design and Cultural politics in Postwar Britain*, London: Leicester University Press, pp. 17– 28.

—— (2004), ‘Design and everyday life at the Britain Can Make It exhibition, 1946: “stripes, spots, white wood and homespun versus chintzy armchairs and iron bedsteads with brass knobs”’, The Journal of Architecture, 9:4,
pp. 463–76.

Zukin, S. and Smith Maguire, J. (2004), ‘Consumers and consumption’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30, pp. 173–97, https://blogs.stockton.edu/amst5005/ files/2013/01/Zukin-and-Maguire-Consumers-and-Consumption.pdf. Accessed 20 May 2018.

Contributor Details

Deborah Chambers is Professor of media and cultural studies in the School of Arts and Cultures at Newcastle University, United Kingdom. She is author of Changing Media, Homes and Households: Cultures, Technologies and Meanings (Routledge, 2016), and Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship (Palgrave, 2013). Contact: Media, Culture and Heritage in School of Arts and Cultures, Newcastle University, Newcastle, NE1 7RU, United Kingdom. E-mail: deborah.chambers@newcastle.ac.uk